

Apparently Tesco created the mini-controversy, which was covered in London newspapers the Independent and the Daily Telegraph, in part to draw attention to the line of Wharfedale-branded DVD players it has begun selling - which, not-so-coincidentally, can be modified by consumers to bypass region coding. The chain tested the pounds180 (about \$300) player in a handful of stores, but moved "tens of thousands" of units into 400 locations beginning February 17. "Demand has been huge," Tesco said in a statement, "after Internet sites and electrical magazines showed customers how to change the player to recognize discs from around the world."

Sub-\$200 Player Garners Following In U.S.

Demand for code-free players isn't limited to the U.K. In the U.S., a small but enthusiastic cult audience has embraced the Apex AD-600A in recent weeks. The player, available for \$159-\$179 at Circuit City stores nationwide, includes an undocumented "loophole" menu that can be accessed by punching an obscure key sequence into the remote control unit. Users who navigate to that menu are greeted with a message reading "You should not be here," plus a slew of options, including changing or disabling region codes, and turning off the player's Macrovision copy protection feature.

Judging by Internet postings from eager consumers, stocks of the player were depleted at Circuit City stores nationwide during the first week of February. By mid-February, however, the units were back in stock, and still supported the undocumented menu options.

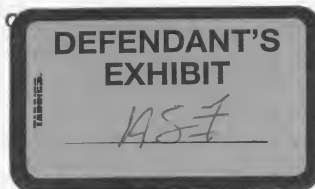
The player includes some other unusual (for the U.S.) features, such as the ability to play back CD-Rs full of MP3 audio tracks as well as Video CDs and Super Video CDs. A button on the remote control switches between NTSC and PAL output, and the player passes Dolby Digital, DTS, and MPEG-2 audio streams. It also includes component video outputs, which are unusual in such a low-cost player.

Company: 'Not Something We Subscribe To'

When contacted by DVD Report, a representative of Ontario, CA-based Apex denied knowledge of the hidden menu, but confirmed that the matter is being investigated. "If it does do that [disable Macrovision and region coding], it will be disabled," he said, apparently attributing any such functionality to the original manufacturer of the player components. "It's not something we subscribe to, and we don't intend to sell them with something you're not supposed to be doing."

It wouldn't be the first time a player has been easily modified for code-free playback. Sony's very first model, the DVP-S7000, was the player of choice for early adopters, who loved its reference-quality video as well as the two tiny switches inside the case that disabled Macrovision and region coding on the unit's first run. Since then, instructions for modifying chips inside various players have been widely available on the Internet, as have sources for purchasing pre-modified players (at a premium over MSRP).

Information on the source of the components used in the Apex-branded



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player is scarce. A company Web page that originally cited China's Visual Disc and Digital Video (VDDV) has since vanished, along with a home page for VDDV that reportedly offered multiple player models to potential OEMs, with code-free playback as one option. To read more about the player, visit the dedicated discussion boards at <http://www.nerd-out.com/apex/>. To get a look under the hood, see photographs at <http://www.best.com/~rdell/apex/>

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